

RE-LEARNING HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE AGE OF CONVERGENCE: Example of Lithuania

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*"Man is the only being who needs education,"
and that "Man can only become man by education" (see footnotes 1)*

ABSTRACT

Since May of 1999, 46 European countries have been engaged in reconstructing their higher education systems to bring about a greater degree of "convergence," i.e. a move toward common reference points and operating procedures to create a European Higher Education Area.

Education has always played an important role in the development of Lithuania, with long and strong traditions as a country with highly educated scientists and cutting-edge research in various fields. In April 2009, the Seimas passed a new Law on Science and Studies, which provides for a major reform of higher education. In recent years there has been an increasing focus on the role universities play in the economy and impact they make in promoting innovation and raising international competitiveness. But until recently there has been a prescriptive view of university-business interactions with a narrow focus on technology transfer. Although technology transfer may be important, it is also necessary to focus on the more diverse and varied impacts of business-university knowledge exchange relations.

Thus, I discuss changes in higher education that were implemented in Lithuania during the period of 1992-2012, i. e. Student baskets, notorious optimization of university network in Lithuania, the development of Lithuanian science valleys, etc. In my survey I rely upon an IHEP (Institute for Higher Education Policy) expert Cliff Adelman's idea that the Bologna Process is an analogue to the macroeconomic theory of convergence, the ways in which nations move from different stages of development to a more-or-less common platform of performance. Macroeconomic historians have demonstrated time-and-again: nations that learn from other nations grow; those that do not learn do not. Ultimately, I arrive at a conclusion that reforms are essential and indispensable but answer the purpose only when higher quality in education is achieved.

Keywords: Convergence, research, international competitiveness, knowledge exchange relations, student basket, science valleys, the Lisbon strategy, Bologna Process.

INTRODUCTION

Advocating the importance of education Immanuel Kant said that "Man is the only being who needs education," and that "Man can only become man by education" Since May of 1999, 46 European countries have been engaged in reconstructing their higher education systems to bring about a greater degree of "convergence," i.e. a move toward common reference points and operating procedures to create a European Higher Education Area.

This voluntary undertaking, a logical extension of the idea of European integration that has been deepening since 1950 -as well as a cultivation of seedlings of change in higher education that were planted in the 1990s- affects 4000 institutions and 16 million students, an enterprise comparable to the size and scope of higher education in the United States. The undertaking is known as The Bologna Process, named for the Italian city that is home to Europe's oldest university, where the education ministers of 29 countries first agreed to the agenda and "action lines" that would bring down education borders in the same way that economic borders had been dissolved. That means harmonization, not standardization. When these national higher education systems work with the same reference points they produce a "zone of mutual trust" that permits recognition of credentials across borders and significant international mobility for their students. Everyone is singing in the same key, though not necessarily with the same tune. In terms reaching across geography and languages, let alone in terms of turning ancient higher education systems on their heads, the Bologna Process is the most far reaching and ambitious reform of higher education ever undertaken.ⁱ

The Bologna Process is an analogue to the macroeconomic theory of convergence, the ways in which nations move from different stages of development to a more-or-less common platform of performance. Macroeconomic historians have demonstrated time-and-again: nations that learn from other nations grow; those that do not learn do not.

EXAMPLE OF LITHUANIA

Education has always played an important role in the development of Lithuania, with long and strong traditions as a country with highly educated scientists and cutting-edge research in various fields.

In addition, as Christian Rammer, Mark O. Sellenthin, from Linköping University conclude in their The "Policy Mix" project "differing from the other two Baltic states, Lithuania did not experience a complicated ethnic situation at the time of re-independence in 1991, thus, there were prospects for a smoother transition" (see footnotes 2)

Meanwhile education was and still is one of those specific sectors that requires greater attention. International assessment groups started visiting Universities of Lithuania as soon as it gained independence. Certain changes have been implemented. Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (CQAHE), an independent public agency was established in 1995.

The Centre implements the external quality assurance policy in higher education in Lithuania and contributes to the development of human resources by creation of enabling conditions for free movement of persons. The Centre was founded by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Lithuania as an expert institution.

The main function of the Centre is to assist HEI to assure quality and to constantly improve it. It also provides information about HEIs in Lithuania and abroad, gives an information letter providing information about person's studies in Lithuania if he/she wants to make his/her qualification recognition abroad easier. For employers it provides information about the level of studies if they are interested in improvement of employees' qualifications. HEIs apply for advice on self-assessment when they want to improve the quality of activities. Thus, the center helps to improve studies invoking Lithuanian and foreign experts and also assesses new study programmes if HEIs want to register them.

Further on, one of the most important changes that EU space policy brought to Lithuania was that Lithuania switched over to the European model of higher education that makes a clear distinction between university and non-university studies; it is divided into undergraduate, graduate and post graduate studies. The common time and workload framework allows for a bigger mobility of students and comparability of degrees. At present there are 21 universities (state and private) and 27 colleges in Lithuania; the country is well above the EU average by the proportion of students per 1000 to the total population aged 20-29 (LT- 73.21; EU-52,8). The changes in the legal status and governance of universities have granted rights to engage in business activities: purchase and sell property, set up companies, get loans. The most disputable innovations of the reform are changes in financing: the notorious "student basket", which includes teachers' salaries, costs of study materials and scholarships, has caused a real commotion in universities' hunt for potential students with their full baskets. The more students are admitted, the more finance a university or college gets. Meanwhile Vilnius University is a single university where high school graduates only with top results can expect to study. Citizens of European Union and European Economic Area countries apply under the same conditions as Lithuanian applicants. All of them are admitted through joint admission. The Lithuanian Higher Institutions Association for Organizing Joint Admission (LAMA BPO) develops and carries out admission procedures applicable to all its members.

No reform would be true to its name if it were not challenged and questioned at each step. Almost 50 HE institutions in Lithuania - is it just enough or too many? In 2009-2010 45,6 % of the emigrants from Lithuania were of the age of 20-39, how many of them carried away their university diplomas and educated brains?ⁱⁱ

In 2009, 36,374 students were admitted to institutions of higher education in Lithuania: 23,538 students were admitted to universities and 12,836 -to colleges. 20,891 first-year students received full state financing (twice as many as the previous years). More than a half of first-year students studied free of charge. Another 15,483 admitted students' pay tuition fee for their studies: 11,949 students were admitted to universities and 3,534 – to colleges. 2.4 Billion Litas of EU structural funds are planned to be allocated for the development of Lithuanian higher education and research in the period from 2007 to 2013.

Pre-history

The statehood of Lithuania was restored in 1990, but the movement for the independence of education from the Soviet Union commenced earlier in 1988 by proclaiming the Concept of Secondary General Education School of the Lithuanian SSR, also known as the Concept of National School, which provided for the restructuring of education in Lithuania based on the principles of democracy and national culture.

Lithuania has implemented a 12-year general education system. Lithuanian education system consists of the following levels:

- **Pre-school education**
- **Pre-primary education**
- **Primary education (primary education curricula);**
- **Parents and children can also choose schools of non-traditional education or individual classes/groups in municipal schools. Montessori, Waldorf, Suzuki pedagogical systems can be chosen in Lithuania.**
- **Lower secondary education**
- **Upper secondary education**
- **For the period of 2007–2013, EU support in the amount of 676.1 million litas allocated for the School Improvement Programme Plus (MTP+) was implemented in Lithuanian general education schools.**
- **Vocational education**
Having acquired secondary education and decided to pursue their studies, students can choose studies in a vocational school or studies in an institution of higher education – a college or a university. Youth schools are meant for 12–16 year-old adolescents that have not managed to adapt to studying at schools of general education, lack motivation or have no other choice because of the social situation that they face.
- **Higher education (university studies and non-university studies);**
- **Doctoral studies and post-graduate art studies.**

Speaking about universities and non-university studies there are

- **Undergraduate (bachelor degree, professional diploma), duration at least 3 years (120 credits) (for colleges, professional qualification) or at least 3,5 year (140 credits) for Bachelor degree or (and) professional qualification; 1 credit – 40 hours of work load.**
- **Graduate (master degree, professional diploma – only at universities) (at least 1,5 year, 60 credits). Some undergraduate and graduate programmes might be combined (total duration at least 5 years or 200 credits);**
- **Doctoral studies (3-4 years) or aspirancy for arts (2 years). Doctoral degree might be awarded only after thesis defence.**

In the Soviet system educational and vocational training qualification was nothing more but a tool for the distribution of persons to the labor force categories, needed for the planned economy, used solely by the institutions, performing the labor force planning and distribution activities. Personal initiative when planning professional career was rather limited therefore the vocational qualification was not a guide for professional development. In addition, vocational qualification was construed as a set of certain specialized competences and skills, acquired once and determining a person's professional activities throughout his lifetime.

The educational and professional activity processes in the planned economy and planned vocational training system were strictly separated. Such a position completely corresponded to the mechanism of functioning of planned economy and the related educational and vocational training system, which would not be able to stay alive in the labor force professional mobility environment.

Right after the restoration of independence the institutional reform of Lithuania's vocational training was launched. The secondary vocational technical schools, inherited from the Soviet times were renamed into vocational schools and four level training programmes were offered.

The time period, following 1996 is characterized as the time period of raising the vocational training quality level up to the international standards. During the phase the priorities were given to development of vocational training standards, evaluation of studies and training programmes' quality and implementation of advanced training technologies.

The following Lithuania's vocational training reform quality ensuring factors are distinguished in the White Book: the grounding of the reform by the PHARE programme, involvement of Lithuania into the European Union programmes -Leonardo da Vinci, Socrates, etc., establishment of vocational training studies and methodology development institution- in 1996 the vocational training methodology.

In 2000 the reform of higher education that was started to establish and was conditioned by Lithuania's integration into the EU, with the intent to develop well-run international students' and teachers' mobility, achieve acknowledgment of qualification and the like, shaped the binary system of higher education-sector of universities and colleges. Lithuania's involvement in the common area of European science and studies, the development of knowledge society, increasing demands of labour market, increasing importance of education and professional competences claim for more attention to assurance of science and studies quality at all education levels and sectors and skilled specialists' preparation. Ambitious European reforms (academic mobility, ECTS and the like) promote the performance of structural changes of study programs, paying more attention to international cooperation and study quality assurance. In recent years the topic of study quality assurance and assessment as well as the internationalization of study and science has become very important both on a national and international scale (Juknyte-Petreikiene, Lekaviciene 2005).

An Overview of Current Situation

Openness to the world at the same time increases requirements for education quality-studying people in Lithuania want to get higher education that is relevant to continuous studies and labour market both in Europe and in the world. That is why a complex way of striving for quality awaits (Jučevičienė, 1998: 51). Further on, to go back to the Bologna, the fundamental aim of the process is to create the common European higher education area. Striving for this, there are defined the main, equally important for the European governments and for every European higher education institution goals: international competitiveness of European higher education area, mobility and employability (Lourtie, 2001).

In the declaration the objectives for introducing the common system of European credit transfer system (ECTS), agreeing on that it takes at least 3 years to get a bachelor degree, promoting the cooperation in quality assurance in study and science, stimulating the implantation of European dimension in higher education were confirmed (Bologna Declaration, 1999).

Such aims of the Bologna process as the comparability and recognition of qualifications and degrees, establishment of the ECTS

system, promotion of international mobility, the concept of life-long learning, promotion of European dimensions in higher education and strengthening of attraction and competitive ability of the common European area of higher education indicate the tendencies of europeanisation, internationalisation and globalisation in higher education area (Juknyte-Petreikiene, Lekaviciene 2005).

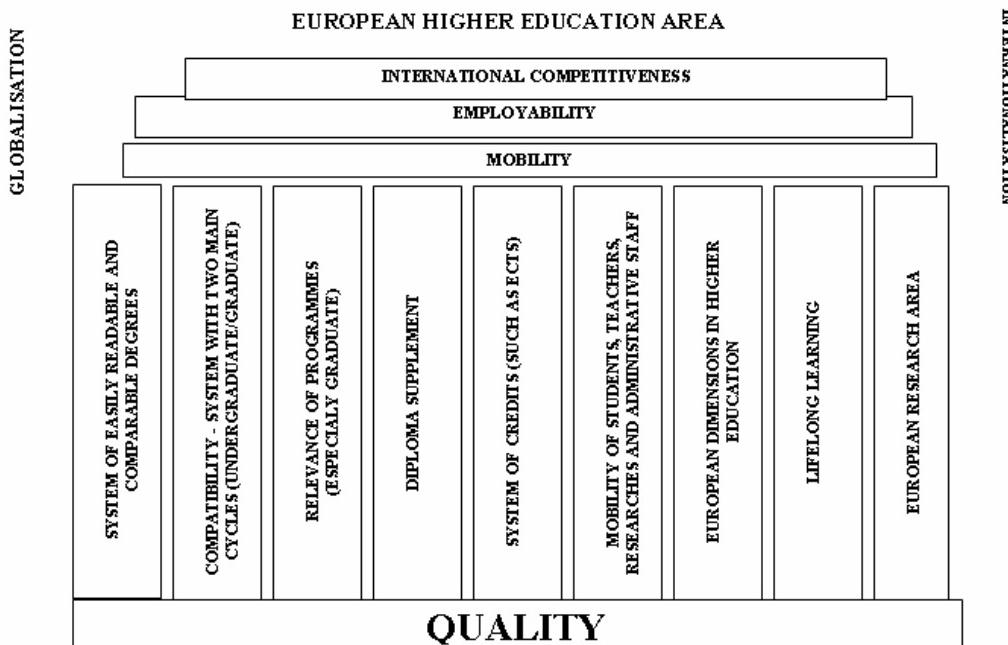


Figure: 1
Prepared according to: Lisbon Convention (1997), Sorbonne Declaration (1998),
Bologna Declaration (1999), Prague Communiqué (2001) and Berlin Communiqué (2003).

Thus, European higher education authorities, academic leaders, faculty, and students have accomplished and learned over the first decade of their considerable efforts, particularly in the challenging matters of:

- Student learning outcomes (set in what are called “qualification frameworks”),
- The relationship of these frameworks to credits and curriculum reform,
- The construction of new paths to student participation in higher education, including refinement of “short-cycle” degrees analogous to our Associate’s, and combinations of e-learning and part-time status,
- The reflection of all of this in the documentation of student attainment called “Diploma Supplements,” and the expansion of this documentation in a lifelong “Europass,”
- The establishment of a “zone of mutual trust” through an all-encompassing
- culture of quality assurance, and an international accreditation register, and

- Consolidating and hence clarifying the myriad of academic credentials offered across 46 countries into common "cycles," which, in combination with qualification frameworks, a common credit system, and quality assurance, assures the recognition of degrees across national borders (Adelman 2009)

At present of 1200 degree programmes offered by Lithuanian colleges and universities, more than 200 are being renewed. In addition, new international joint degree programmes are being developed. Currently there are 6 joint degree programmes. To finance further development – 18,5 million € will be allocated. By 2013, the national goal is to have at least 15 more international joint degree programmes. The growth in numbers of international students at Lithuanian colleges and universities is actively encouraged.

At present, there are 46 bachelor's and 61 master's degree programmes offered in foreign languages, such as English, Russian or Polish. By 2013, more than 50 degree programmes additionally will be taught in languages, other than Lithuanian. Allocated funds will comprise 2.3 million €. By 2020, the national goal is to have 10 percent of international students at HE institutions of Lithuania. Currently, non-Lithuanians comprise 2 percent of total student population. Thus, Lithuania is participating in the establishment of the common European higher education area. The professional qualifications acquired in our country are recognised abroad. Over a thousand of students and lecturers leave abroad each year for studies or internships.

In April 2009, the Seimas passed a new Law on Science and Studies, which provides for a major reform of higher education. The main goal of the reform is quality of education. Students want to acquire a high-quality education without leaving Lithuania, businesses are in need of highly qualified specialists, higher education establishments and research institutes -professional scientists, and the public- a guaranteed and secure future. Upon completion of the reform, research will be financed on a competitive basis, and higher education -according to the principle of the 'student's basket'. State funding for bachelor studies is given to students, not institutions. State funding for bachelor studies is provided in the form of student vouchers to the best school leavers. Students who receive financial support from the state can choose freely an educational institution- whether it is a public or a private one, though this question has been under severe discussions since the day of its implementation. State funds allocated for vouchers are divided into six fields of studies to meet the demand for different kinds of specialists (Figure: 2).

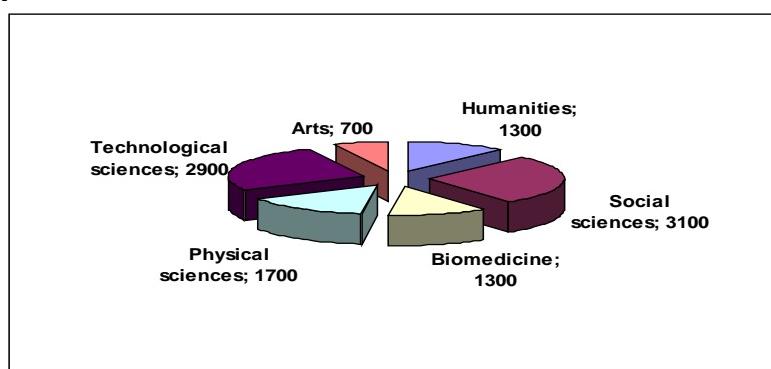


Figure: 2
Distribution of "baskets" for universities, 2009 (out of 11000)

The students who received best marks in their tertiary education graduation examinations will study free of charge at a higher education establishment of their choice, others are granted access to studies upon creation of, as the Ministry of Education declared, "an efficient system of state-funded loans. Such a system of funding introduced a fair and transparent competition in higher education, where success will directly depend on performance." But the results obtained during the first year of the reform demonstrated its vices and shortcomings as an industrious student with top results during his first 2 years of learning was promised to receive a basket. It did not happen because there are a certain number of baskets or students with a basket who entered the University. An industrious student with top results would be able to receive the basket only if one of his fellow students loses it. Therefore, students requested for the corrections to be made and review the results after their first year of studies. In 2009 the studies of over 11.000 first-year university students and over 10.000 first-year college students were funded by the state in Lithuania.

The internal governance and legal status reform in higher education continued in 2010. Three public higher education schools completed all the necessary procedures. Fourteen higher education schools (nine universities and five colleges) published their new statutes.

Ten public higher education schools (six universities and four colleges) set up their new councils. A new legal status of a public establishment (formerly, budget institution) was acquired by eight higher education schools (five universities and three colleges).

New management was elected in five higher education schools (four universities and one college). In preparation for the external evaluation of higher education, the necessary legislation was passed. The reorganization of research institutes has practically been completed: 16 research institutes have merged with universities, 13 research institutes merged in five research centres (research institutes), six institutes have been granted the status of a research institute.

Speaking about the reform, there will always pros and cons. The prices fixed for certain study programmes, esp. arts, was too high; some laws released by the Ministry of Education were declared by the Constitutional Court of Lithuania as contradicting to the Constitution.

Moreover, with the borders open and rather high fees being implemented in Lithuania, a number of high school graduates left the country in search of foreign universities offering studies free of charge (Holland, Finland, Sweden, Edinburgh).

Those who stay require higher education establishments to be dynamic, improvement-committed, and responsible for their activities. The establishments have more freedom in managing property; they are granted the right to independently plan their strategy of activities, to be more active in solving the issues of development, merger, renovation of laboratories and dormitories; the principles of a transparent responsibility and accountability to the public have also been stipulated.

On the basis of experience of Western Europe, a new model of management of State colleges and universities is being introduced, where the most important strategic decisions are adopted by the councils consisting of the academic community and the broad public.

The science and studies reform aims at attaining an ambitious goal – the bringing forward of the country's economy.

Lithuania's long-term strategic documents stress the necessity of a closer interaction between science, studies and business. The year 2008 marked the beginning of establishment of five integrated centers of science, studies and business. The centers are expected to help to create in Lithuania internationally recognized nuclei of science, studies and knowledge economy and speed up the creation of knowledge society.

Further on, the Lisbon strategy requested that each member state and candidate to the European Union members by 2010 was to allocate 3 per cent of GDP for scientific research activities. In addition, in recent years there has been an increasing focus on the role universities play in the economy and impact they make in promoting innovation and raising international competitiveness. But until recently there has been a prescriptive view of university-business interactions with a narrow focus on technology transfer. Although technology transfer may be important, it is also necessary to focus on the more diverse and varied impacts of business-university knowledge exchange relations.

Therefore, it was decided to allocate over 2 billion Litas for creation and development of Lithuanian science valleys. The funding was received from the EU structural funds, state budget and private investments.

It is expected to establish 5 valleys in Lithuania. The range of scientific research activity of the three centers mentioned will be expanded.

Table: 1
Number of companies in valleys

Valleys	Number of companies
VITP	69
Sunrise Valley	21
Technopolis	8

In the Vilnius "Saulėtekis Technology Valley" it is planned to develop 4 scientific research trends as follows: laser and light technologies; materials science and nanotechnologies; semiconductor physics, electronics and organic electronics, civil engineering.

The „Santara Valley“ is under establishment in Vilnius. The following 4 trends shall be developed in it: biotechnology and large molecular mass materials; molecular medicine and biopharmacy; ecosystems and safe environment research; modeling, informatics and communication technologies. ICT sector's companies and scientists shall work in the Visoriai Information Technologies Park (VITP).

The similar trends shall be developed by the "Santaka Valley" to be established in Kaunas: sustainable chemistry; macaronis and relevant electronic technologies; future energetic; information and communications technologies. The ICT technologies and business shall be developed in the Science and Technology Park (CTP) "Technopolis" which is a partner of the "Santaka Valley".

Table: 2
Distribution Of Enterprises Situated In Technological Parks By Business Activities

	Percentage
Information and telecommunications technologies	34
Energetics and electronics	11
Biotechnologies	1
Engineering technologies, chemistry and food industry	12
Environment protection technologies	5
Medicine and pharmacy	3
Financial, business and other consulting services	23
Other fields of activities	11
EU support for Lithuanian science planned by the Ministry of Science and Education (millions LTL)	
Researcher career program	499; 25 %
General nation complex program	827; 40 %
General nation scientific research and science & business collaboration program	700; 35 %

The “Santaka Valley” in Kaunas and “Jūrinis” (“Sea” in English) in Klaipėda shall be specialized ones. The development trends of “Nemunas Valley” are related to agriculture: agrobiotechnology, bioenergetics and forestry; food technologies, safety and health.

The “Sea Valley” shall be developing 2 trends: the sea environment and sea technologies. Less investment amounts shall be allocated for these special-purpose valleys.

The vision of public enterprise, the “Saulėtekis Valley”, situated at Saulėtekis parkway, next to the University of Vilnius and the Vilnius Gediminas Technical University is related to formation of favorable environment for innovations and business based on dynamic partnership of scientific and study institutions, high technology enterprises and local authorities for purpose of creation of high added value, products and services to be competitive on the world markets.

In order to develop the “Saulėtekis Valley” business support infrastructure there was reserved the breakthrough territory of 2,4 ha (two plots of land of 1,8 ha and 0,6 ha). In addition, detailed territorial plans of 62 ha area (including breakthrough plots of land) were approved. At present, the first complex of business enterprises and incubator covering 6300 sq m operates, where 20 companies are functioning.

The “Saulėtekis Valley” already now is distinguished by almost the biggest concentration of science and studies in the Baltic States (apr. 20 thousand students, scientists, researchers) which will become even more impressing, when the most faculties and scientific research institutes of the Vilnius University and the Vilnius Gediminas Technical University which currently are distributed in different locations of Vilnius will be relocated.

proximity to the biggest Lithuanian universities, but also by the wide range of professional services which shall be provided by Saulėtekis School of Entrepreneurship, Technology Transfer Center, and public and private partners. Issues related to technology transfer, intellectual property management, risk capital sponsorship, establishment and development of consulting companies and applied research result commercialization are the most relevant. "Foreign companies are looking for the right country and city to run business to be situated close to the main markets of the Eastern Europe region, such as Russian, Byelorussian and markets of the Baltic States. Lithuania has the opportunity for development depending on the pace of the valley growth. Some years ago Lithuania was discovered by the IT market leaders, such as "Oracle", "Siemens", IBM. However, slowdown of the world economics makes them consider the development plans more carefully.

Although tax privileges and price are not the most important factors for strong foreign investors, however, Lithuania can attract international capital based on favorable financial system.

CONCLUSIONS

The Bologna Process is an analogue to the macroeconomic theory of convergence. A number of reforms that have been implemented in European countries, also Lithuania, have led to big changes in the systems of higher education.

The mobility programmes of the EU have been successful in significantly increasing the number of mobile students.

Curricular reforms as well as more flexible programmes have allowed for a larger number of students from non-traditional backgrounds to enter HE. Lastly, by implementing ICT in the universities and other HEIs and implementing pedagogical reforms, more learner and thus student centered patterns of learning and teaching have evolved.

The ECTS is a useful tool for credit transfer within the realm of mobility for the moment. However, more work is needed to develop it into a proper accumulation system. Governments should not be forced to introduce ECTS as a generalized credit system but that other compatible systems should coexist.

Reforms of higher education governance structures must not lead to a process of abolishing democracy in higher education institutions.

In recent years there has been an increasing focus on the role universities play in the economy and impact they make in promoting innovation and raising international competitiveness. Individual universities and the academics within them play different and varied roles in national and regional economies; the university's strengths, where it is located, and the business structure in which it is embedded are all important and interdependent. Although technology transfer may be important, it is also necessary to focus on the more diverse and varied impacts of business-university knowledge exchange relations. Reforms are essential and indispensable but answer the purpose only when higher quality in education is achieved.

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